

Poster Exhibitions at Conferences: Are We Doing it Properly?

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OBJECTIVE: Literature exploring the educational value and quality of conference poster presentation is scarce. The aim of this study was to identify and describe the variation in poster exhibitions across a spectrum of conferences attended by trainees.

DESIGN: Prospective observational assessment of conference posters was carried out across 7 variables at 4 conferences attended by surgical trainees in 2012. Posters were compared by individual variables and according to overall poster score combining all 7 variables examined. The number of authors listed was also compared.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS: Random samples of consecutively numbered posters were examined at the exhibitions of 4 conferences, which included a UK national medical education conference (Association for the Study of Medical Education), a UK international surgical conference (Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland), a European oncology conference (European Society of Surgical Oncology), and a North American joint medical and surgical conference (Digestive Diseases Week).

RESULTS: Significant variation existed between conferences in posters and their presentation. The proportion of presenters failing to display their posters ranged from 3% to 26% ($p < 0.0001$). Adherence to size guidelines varied from 89% to 100% ($p = 0.002$). The inclusion of references ranged from 19% to 82% ($p < 0.0001$). The presence of a presenting author during the allocated session

varied widely from 21% to 86% ($p < 0.0001$). No significant variation was observed in the proportion of posters that were formatted using aims, methods, results, and conclusion sections (81%-93%; $p = 0.513$) or in the proportion of posters that were identified as difficult to read (24%-28%; $p = 0.919$). Association for the Study of Medical Education outperformed each of the other exhibitions overall ($p < 0.0001$). Posters with greater than the median of 4 authors performed significantly better across all areas ($p < 0.0001$ -0.042) except presenter attendance ($p = 0.480$).

CONCLUSIONS: Poster exhibitions varied widely, with room for improvement at all 4 conferences. Lessons can be learned by all conferences from each other to improve presenter engagement with and the educational value of poster exhibitions. (J Surg 72:278-282. © 2014 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: conferences, exhibitions, surgical education, surgery, training

COMPETENCIES: Medical Knowledge, Practice-Based Learning and Improvement, Systems-Based Practice, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Professionalism

INTRODUCTION

The era of evidence-based medicine has brought with it a requirement for clinicians to be able and willing to engage effectively in clinical research and audit. All UK specialty trainees are required to understand the value of medical research,¹ and in surgical specialties, participation in research is an essential activity in clinical training.²

In recent years, the importance of teamwork in research and audit has been clearly recognized among some trainee groups: trainees increasingly taking the lead on research collaboration through a growing number of emerging organized trainee research collaboratives.^{3,4}

The culmination of such work for trainees is often the dissemination of findings by presentation at a conference

A.J.B. and R.J.E. conceived the study, collected the data, and drafted the manuscript. J.A., J.J.F., and K.A.F. contributed to literature review, study design, data entry, and interpretation and revisions of the manuscript. All authors approved the final submitted manuscript.

Conflict of interest: At the time of data collection and at the time of submission, J. A. and A.J.B. were in receipt of Royal College of Surgeons of England, UK research fellowship funding, respectively. A.J.B. is an executive committee member and conference organizing committee member of the Association of Surgeons in Training (ASiT).

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and ultimately by publication. Therefore, trainees are frequently found at poster exhibitions of scientific conferences. Such presentations are not only considered important as a means of dissemination, but they also contribute toward formal measures of a trainee's academic activity in training, including scoring in training and consultant post applications and the annual review of competency progression.²

However, literature exploring the educational value of poster presentation is scarce and anecdotal experience suggests that gaining educational benefit from a poster presentation may well be by luck rather than design. Previous studies have reported participation in poster exhibitions to be very low^{5,6} and recall of poster content to be poor.⁶ No existing study was identified in the literature exploring the influence of the number of authors on poster presentations or academic publication.

During attendance at a number of conferences to present research findings, the authors observed wide variation between conferences and were afforded plenty of time to discuss its significance in depth while waiting for their posters to be marked.

This study aims to describe the variation in delegates' engagement with poster exhibitions across a spectrum of conferences attended by trainees in terms of adherence to format and attendance at designated presentation times. We also provide suggestions for trainees and exhibition organizers to optimize the educational value of such exhibitions.

METHODS

This prospective observational study assessed samples of consecutively numbered posters at 4 different conferences attended by surgical trainees during 2012. The research question asked whether presenters' engagement with the process of poster exhibition varied according to the individual conference and the number of authors cited in a poster abstract.

The study used an assessment template, designed by the authors, to record as dichotomous variables the presence or absence of posters and their presenters, adherence to simple guidance for presenters, and a subjective assessment of the ease of interpretation of posters. The number of authors listed on posters was also recorded. Except for the variable relating to poster presence, all proportions were

calculated using the total number of posters displayed, with absent posters excluded. Raw scores for individual domains were combined for each conference to produce a comparable score for overall performance. Posters were assessed during an allocated poster review or assessment session at each conference, and the number of included posters was determined by the time constraints of this session.

Conferences were chosen to represent a spectrum of different areas of study and included a UK national medical education conference (Association for the Study of Medical Education [ASME] annual conference), a UK international surgical conference (Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland annual congress [ASGBI]), a European oncology conference (European Society of Surgical Oncology [ESSO]), and a North American joint medical and surgical conference (Digestive Diseases Week [DDW]).

Ethical Considerations

Posters were assessed independently by 2 authors (A.J.B. and R.J.E.) and any discrepancies were resolved by consensus by discussion.

RESULTS

A total of 485 posters were assessed, with samples from each conference ranging from 55 to 202 posters. Performance in each category by conference is shown in [Table 1](#).

Poster Presence

The proportion of presenters failing to display their posters varied significantly, ranging from 3% to 26% ($p < 0.0001$). The presenters of exhibitions at ASME (3%) and DDW (5%) performed notably well in this respect.

Presenter Presence

The presence of a presenting author during the allocated session varied enormously, from 21% to 86% ($p < 0.0001$), with notably poor presenter attendance at ESSO (21%) and ASGBI (24%).

TABLE 1. Performance by Conference in Each Assessed Category

	ASGBI, n (%)	ASME, n (%)	DDW, n (%)	ESSO, n (%)	χ^2	p-Value
Poster present	98/133 (73.6)	92/95 (96.8)	52/55 (94.5)	150/202 (74.3)	32.404	<0.0001
Presenter present	23/98 (23.5)	79/92 (85.8)	32/52 (61.5)	32/150 (21.3)	120.659	<0.0001
Size	87/98 (88.8)	91/92 (98.9)	52/52 (100.0)	134/150 (89.3)	14.357	0.002
Format	89/98 (90.8)	83/92 (90.2)	42/52 (80.8)	140/150 (93.3)	2.300	0.513
References	48/98 (49.0)	75/92 (81.5)	10/52 (19.2)	65/150 (43.3)	58.930	<0.0001
Interpretability	74/98 (75.6)	70/92 (76.1)	39/52 (75.0)	108/150 (72.0)	0.498	0.919
Overall rating	419/623 (67.3)	490/555 (88.2)	227/315 (72.1)	629/952 (66.1)	96.951	<0.0001

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